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Chicago's Rashid Johnson talks blackness, responsibility to Richard Wright in HBO's 'Native Son'



Rashid Johnson's "Native Son" will premiere on HBO April 6. (Eric Vogel)

By Darcel Rockett | March 26, 2019

Bigger Thomas. Richard Wright. The names are synonymous with Chicago. So it's not unusual that an artist from the area took on "Native Son" as his first feature film debut — a visual artist named Rashid Johnson.

Johnson — a New York City transplant by way of Evanston and Wicker Park — directed the latest reinterpretation of Wright's masterpiece on race and class. Adaptations on Wright's 1940 work are numerous; through the years Bigger's path has been imprinted on the minds of high schoolers and college students alike. Thomas, a South Sider, rapes and murders and dies for his crimes; along the way, the black youth struggles with self-expression. Ashton Sanders ("Moonlight") plays Bigger Thomas and DePaul and Chicago theater alum KiKi Layne ("If Beale Street Could Talk") plays Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend.

Johnson's take on the character modernizes Thomas, tweaks the paths of other characters in his world and still delivers a commentary on the blackness and the black experience that sadly hasn't changed much since the middle of the last century.

"My own autobiography and my relationship to the city of Chicago and the history of canonical, black artistic figures in that community brought me to wanting to tell this story," Johnson said. "You definitely

can't look past the climate that we're currently experiencing in the U.S. and the way that has effected the view that we all have with issues around class, race, access and agency and opportunity for different folks. Fear and anxiety is at an all-time high. I think this book and this story has so much to do with fear and anxiety and the way that we make decisions when we're facing existential concerns and our understanding of who we are as opposed to who we may be viewed as. I just thought it was really pressing to start to talk about those ideas."

We talked with Johnson about his version of Wright's canonical text. The interview has been condensed and edited.

Q: What does it mean for you as an artist to take on such a classic?

A: Honestly, it's a lot of responsibility. But you have to be in some ways aware of that responsibility, then at the same time have a willingness to battle against letting that handicap your vision. Richard Wright is an enormous figure — enormously important to the black literary canon as a whole. In a lot of ways, both literary and visual artists are born of some of the doors that Richard Wright and Wright's *Bigger* opened.

Q: Can you expound on the themes of blackness in the film?

A: This story begins to explore what is not often seen in stories that we get to experience as far as narrative film is concerned. The story of a young, black male who doesn't necessarily fit what people would imagine a stereotypical case. This character is a little bit different, has his own sense of style, own sense of self — it's really conjuring different notions of blackness. Although most black folks are deeply aware of characters like the *Bigger* I present, I think there are a lot of folks who are going to have this as an introduction to a black character they are unfamiliar with and I think it's an exciting opportunity to bring a character to life that film has not necessarily embraced multiple times.

Q: *Bigger* is confronted with his blackness a number of times and his not wanting to be the stereotypical "black man." Tell us more.

A: I understand that character quite well. I think a lot of us do. I think there are very few people who fit into the cage that has sometimes been allotted for black characters to live in. We're not a monolith; we're a complicated group of folks. And I thought this character as a protagonist was an opportunity to talk

about that agency, that complexity, that bit of difference that lives amongst us and in us collectively.

Bigger really fights to get past some of those kind of stereotypical positions, but in the end, the systemic kind of cloud just follows him and finds him unable to escape.

Q: How important is it that we keep hearing Bigger's story, that it keeps being told?

RJ: I think so many of our stories is so important to re-explore or re-examine or retell. When you're thinking about characters like Richard Wright and people who Wright affected were significant, then you can never tell this story too many times.